



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## COMMERCIALIZATION—INCREASING OR DECREASING?

EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS.

COMMERCIALIZATION is the increasing subjection of any calling or function to the profits motive. Normally this motive has a large and legitimate part to play in society. To it we appeal in order to call into being the myriad forms of industry and commerce necessary to provide for the wants of the public. Even here, however, it may govern only in a general way. In each particular transaction it should find counterpoise in the desire to keep faith with the patron by supplying only honest goods and loyal services. In a bearer of responsibility, however, such as clergyman, teacher, judge, official, artist and journalist, it is expected that lust of gain will be quite subordinated to the obligation to render a vital service or discharge an essential function.

Into the production of a good or a service may enter various motives which hold the profits motive in check, viz., 1. Pleasure in creative activity; 2. Pride in the perfection of one's product; 3. Accepted standards of technical excellence which forbid the putting forth of a ware or a service which falls below a certain degree of merit; 4. Abhorrence of sham or humbug in one's work. Desire to render loyal service, to market genuine goods; 5. Solicitude for the welfare of the customer or patron prompting one to refuse to supply him with that which will disappoint, defraud or harm him; 6. Doing one's work as a service to society.<sup>1</sup>

There is commercialization when the profits motive gains the upper hand of these nobler motives. In case the rela-

---

<sup>1</sup> *i.e.*, acting on the principle of Comte: "Every person who lives by any useful work should be habituated to regard himself not as an individual working for his own private benefit, but as a public functionary working for the benefit of society; and to regard his wages of whatever sort as the provision made by society to enable him to carry on his labor."

tions between producer and consumer, or between server and served, continue in the same intimacy, the profits motive will not play a greater rôle unless the motives which limit it are weakened. In such a case commercialization would be the result and proof of moral decay.

Now, in contemporary society there is no general moral decay. Using the ancient test relations as a dial face, the onward movement in humanity, sympathy and charity is most cheering. In the treatment of children, of women, of the aged, of dependents, of convicts, of aliens, of underlings, of the weaker race or class by the stronger race or class, the improvement in our times is beyond all question. Nor are we in doubt as to the causes of this rapid humanization. With the vanishing of personal encounter, the passing of judicial torture, branding, stocks, pillory, whipping post and cart's tail, the renouncing of flogging and keelhauling in the navy, the vanishing of public executions, the abandonment of cock-fighting and bear-baiting, the outlawry of prize fighting, the restraining of brutal teamsters, the substitution of electricity for the horse, the removal of the diseased, maimed and misshapen from the streets to public institutions, the feelings are no longer calloused as of yore and human good will is able to assert itself with its original native force.

The encroachment of the profits motive in our time is, therefore, not chargeable to moral decay. It is a consequence of certain transformations which have occurred in our economic relations:

### I.

(1) Greater social distance between producer and consumer: Less and less often nowadays is the user of one's ware a concrete known person to whom one feels a sense of responsibility. One's product passes out into that vague mass, the "public," and there is lost to view. Hence, the baker who kneads "chalk and alum and plaster" into his loaf may be no miscreant, after all, for he cannot know just who will eat that loaf or what gripe it will give him. Only a villain would fit out an unsuspecting customer with a life pre-

server filled with sawdust instead of cork; but the manufacturers who a few years ago were found to be equipping excursion steamers with these spurious "life preservers" may have been far from moral monsters. They were supplying their treacherous wares not to men and women, but to "the market."

The corporate form of business organization thrusts apart producers and consumers. The stockholders on whose behalf iniquity is done do not consciously will it. It is not their wish that children should be worn out for them, or workmen maimed in avoidable industrial accidents, or consumers defrauded, or the public taste corrupted. They instigate such wickedness only because they know not what they do when they clamor for dividends and blindly support the management which has increased dividends. Their avarice is reflected in the conduct of the business, but not their good will.

Not only does incorporation take personal responsibility out of business relations, but every year sees more savings banks, trust companies and insurance companies come between industrial concerns and those who provide the money. This makes it still more difficult for the conscience of the latter to influence the management.

Nevertheless, when a corporation becomes so large that it fills a place in the public eye, it develops a sense of responsibility of its own. Its volume of output is so great that its products must be well spoken of everywhere. Hence, it strives for excellence and sincerity in its goods and acts on the maxim, "the satisfied customer is the best advertisement." Owing to its conspicuousness it is sensitive to public opinion. It feels obliged to maintain a reputation so good that it can draw into its service men of the highest character. Its treatment of labor is so well-known among workingmen that if it acquires a bad name it will be unable to attract labor of the best quality. Therefore, the great corporations take the lead not only in square-dealing with the customer, but in looking after the safety, health and welfare of their employees.

(2) The growing differentiation between principals and subordinates: In large concerns the men at the top may adopt with impunity greedy policies which they well know cannot be carried out without deceit or corruption. They would not do such dirty work themselves, but they require others to do it. Upon their subordinates they impose the obligation to get "results," but are very careful not to learn of the crooked means by which alone the "results" they insist on may be obtained. The veins of business like the veins of the body have valves, their purpose being to check the return flow to the principals of knowledge of the odious practices and the blistering tirades to which the policies they insist on give rise. Safe behind their cordon of underlings they instigate crimes which they lack the nerve to commit in the open.

(3) The increasing prominence of capital in the practice of an art or profession tends to subordinate artistic or professional conscience to profit: This is illustrated in the commercialization of the stage. As the theater-going public becomes accustomed to more sumptuous and costly stage effects, the actor-manager gives way to the capitalist-manager. The actor-manager is dominated by the idea of "elevating the stage," of making the drama a great and uplifting social force. His master-dream is to present Shakespere and "Shakespere spells ruin." Great actors like Booth and Irving pass their lives either as "stars" accumulating a fortune, or as managers squandering it in giving the public drama finer than it is willing to pay for. But with the greater costliness of theatrical production the capitalist-manager comes to the fore, while the successful actor, even the greatest, remains throughout his career an employee. Generally this type of producer tries to see not how high one dare go, but how low one dare go. Ideals and social aims are contemptuously kicked out of the theatrical business. The only question is "What will the Public like?" and this is answered frequently by a vulgar avaricious man who has no comprehension of what the public will like *in the long run* and no idea that the taste

of the public admits of being educated upward as well as downward.

(4) The profits motive and the newspaper: In newspaper publishing the capital factor gains constantly on the service factor, with the result that less and less is the editor-owner able to hire the capital he needs, while more and more the owner is a capitalist who hires the editors he needs. The capitalist owner is likely to run the newspaper as a pure "business proposition," *i.e.*, as he would run a theater or a hotel, and less often than the editor-owner does he see it as a great social instrumentality. Furthermore, the newspaper is a peculiar undertaking in that it unites two services altogether different,—the purveyance of news and opinions and the sale of publicity in the form of advertising. The former is a responsible public service, the latter the marketing of a ware. Now, constantly the share of the newspaper's receipts from advertising grows while the receipts from readers and subscribers dwindle. Speaking broadly, advertisers yield the newspapers three times as much financial support as their readers. There are numerous indications that the advertisers are waking up to the fact that they hold the whip hand and are exercising an increasing censorship over the newspapers—a censorship which is secret, of course, for a journal known to be controlled loses its readers and therewith its value to the advertiser. Most significant is the way in which during the war the newspapers, in order to please their advertisers, preached "Business as usual," when, for the sake of the Liberty loans, they should have preached "Nothing as usual."

Thus it happens that, although the social mission of the newspaper was never so widely recognized as now, although nearly forty schools and courses for journalism have been established within fifteen years, the clandestine prostitution of the newspaper to the business interests has never been so general. With the proportion of receipts from advertising creeping up each year, the newspaper is coming to be an advertising circular carrying reading matter,

rather than a news medium carrying advertising. The situation will get worse until society treats the newspaper as a public utility in need of regulation and restricts its rôle as seller of publicity. If newspapers were not allowed to derive more than a modest proportion of their total income from advertising, they would cost us more but they would tell more truth.

(5) The "corporation collar": When a lawyer sits in his office and causes are brought to him, he can choose which to undertake. But a large business finds itself in need of a continuous supply of legal services and therefore retains a lawyer to look after its interests in all cases which may involve it. Such a relation saps his moral independence for, even if his client's cause is unjust, he is obliged to stand for it under penalty of losing his employment. Against his conscience he may be required to defend all suits brought by injured workmen or for violation of the anti-child labor laws and to prosecute malicious eviction suits against striking tenants of company houses. Thus the practice of law becomes a mere tool of business and the lawyer's work is cut out for him by the business man. As the proportion of lawyers who accept corporation service grows, the chances are poorer for the independent attorneys who take only the cases they believe in.

(6) The profits motive in art: It is said that half or more of the statuary made in the United States is not carved by the man who signs it. Sculptors of reputation sign the product of young unknown men reaping for themselves the proceeds and the honor. "Monument associations" interpose themselves between sculptor and public. They have agents in the field soliciting contributions for the erection of a statue for some famous man or event. An open competition will be announced, with a prize for the best model submitted, but the association sees to it that the prize goes to the model submitted by some young sculptor in its employ.

(7) The commercialization of amusement and recreation: Formerly young folks' fun was not catered, but was

self-made, home-made, church-made, or school-made. In the home there was the inevitable chaperonage of the old folks amiably looking on. Entertainments held in the school-house ordinarily were supervised by the teacher and, in any case, the school trustees were in the background as board of censors. Other social gatherings were sponsored by the church or by some daughter organization. Now, the habit of contenting one's self with amateur amusement is dying out. Thanks to good roads and automobiles the country young people are turning from their home-bred fun to the professional amusement makers to be enjoyed in the town. Since the art of entertainment has become specialized, the church no longer exercises in matters of recreation the initiative and supervision she once had. Less and less is she able to compete with the regular places of amusement, while her ban on dancing and theater-going has become a dead-letter.

In a word, as never before, recreation is being supplied for money. The danger of this is that commercial recreation tends to become a means for the economic and moral exploitation of the young. It is in the nature of play and amusement to tend upward or tend downward. In case they are catered and without regulation, they tend downward, because more money can be extracted from young people by offering them the high-flavored, the *risqué*, the sensational, than by offering them the pure and elevating. The conscience of the individual amusement-caterer is well-nigh a negligible factor, for if he is restrained by scruples he will be forced out of business by a less scrupulous rival. In this field the man without conscience is "fittest."

Some benefit, no doubt, is to be had from the regulation of commercial amusements, *e.g.*, the censoring of shows and motion films and the supervision of public dance halls. The only policy, however, which holds much promise is the communal provision of recreation. This is why in the last twenty years there has been a wonderful expansion of the facilities provided by institutional churches, the Young Men's Christian Association, the Young Women's Chris-



tian Association, the social settlements, the social centers, the recreation centers, the public playgrounds and the public libraries. Society has resolved not to abandon this field to Mammon.

Were there space one might go on to show the commercialization of the saloon (which was the real cause of the adoption of national prohibition); of prostitution; of sport and inter-collegiate athletics (save where a strong barrier has been raised); of immigration from Europe by the transport companies; and of war scares and military preparedness by the munition-makers.

## II.

While, however, the profits motive has made these encroachments in our time, let no one suppose that this motive has always had a career of triumphant aggression. The fact is, social history is strewn with discarded commercialisms. One might almost sum up the moral side of social progress as the expulsion of the profits motive from parts of the social order where it has no business to be.

(1) De-commercialized mating: At one time the father without consulting his daughter disposed of her hand to the highest bidder. Sometimes, as among the Tekke Turcomans today, when the daughter's services are very remunerative to the father, he names a bride-price so high that she goes through life without a mate!<sup>1</sup> A century ago in in Servia, what with purchase price and presents to members of the bride's family, a wife became so dear that "many a poor fellow was unable to marry at all." Finally a price-fixing law was passed restricting payment for a bride to one ducat. A common result of wife purchase has been that the rich old men monopolize youth and beauty while the younger and poorer men have only hags. On the other hand, in some societies a "marriage portion" has been expected with the bride, so that the portionless girls go husbandless.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the effect of the great demand for "Bokhara" rugs in handicapping Turcoman maids in the matrimonial market see Ross, "Russia in Upheaval," end of Chapter V, "The Rug Market at Merv."

In olden times an approved philanthropy was to provide poor girls with marriage portions. In the folk tales the crowning proof of romantic love was the lover's willingness to take his sweetheart without a portion. It is but a quarter of a century since Westermarck wrote, "In our days a woman without a marriage portion, unless she has some great natural attraction, runs the risk of being a spinster forever." How remote all such huckstering seems! Probably at no stage of civilization has mating been so free from the taint of avarice as in America today.

(2) De-commercialized religion: When the religion of sacrifice prevailed a man won divine favor in proportion to his contributions to the god. The petitioner who offered the richer sacrifice believed that the god would surely be on his side. The unseen powers were supposed to bestir themselves more for the rich man who could offer a hecatomb than for the poor wight who could offer only a dove. This type of religion however was displaced by faiths like those of Jesus and Mahomet which make God's favor depend on the *heart* of the worshipper rather than on his *sacrifice*. Jesus' parable of the widow's mite is a landmark in the humanizing of religion.

With the conviction that the petitioner does well to have his sacrifice and request offered by an expert, a wide door was opened to making money out of religion. Originally the priest was a pray-er. He knew just what formulas, postures, and gestures to use under the given conditions. By such means he could *compel* the god to do his will. Naturally he would not exercise this mystic power on behalf of the worshipper without pay, any more than an attorney will plead his client's cause without fee. So the priest charged a stiff price for his services and grew wealthy. In Homer's time the priests drank the finest dark wine of which he knew. It is a far cry from this to the Christian priest exercising his functions under responsibility and bound to serve the poor without fee,—farther yet to the Protestant and Mohammedan conception of a clergy who are pastors and edifiers, but not intermediaries between the

soul and God. About the close of the second century Tertullian declared that in heathenism the very gods are for sale, that no one is admitted free of charge to the knowledge of the gods. A fee is exacted for room in the temple, for even admittance thereto. Among Christians on the contrary, "no market value is set on anything in our religion. We have indeed boxes for offerings . . . contributions, however, are not compulsory but spontaneous."

(3) De-commercialized government: It was customary for the Roman state to farm out its taxes rather than collect them by the hand of its own servants. Syndicates bid against one another for the right to collect a particular tax in a certain province for a term of years. The contract with the censor fixed the rate at which the publican or tax gatherer could collect, but there was little to restrain the practice of extortion. Only the powerful could profit by the subject's right to appeal to the governor. "Wherever the tax gatherers penetrate," says Livy, "there is no justice or liberty for anyone." "Imagine," writes Cicero, "what is the fate of our allies in the remoter provinces when even in Italy I hear the complaints of Roman citizens." Among the Jews the publicans could not enter a court of law to give testimony, nor fill offices of judicature, nor engage in public prayers. No money was to be changed at their treasury, their contributions to charity were not accepted and they were ranked with thieves and murderers.

About the close of the seventeenth century the French Crown began to sell to sixty "farmers-general" the right to collect the indirect taxes. Adam Smith describes their profits as "exorbitant" and the collection as "wasteful and expensive." Commenting on the fact that their cruel methods often led to bloody conflicts, he remarks: "Those who consider the blood of the people as nothing, in comparison with the revenues of princes, may, perhaps, approve of this method of levying taxes." When the Convention met it prosecuted the farmers-general as enemies of the people and guillotined thirty-five of them. Amidst

Vol. XXX.—No. 3

general execration, the system fell after an existence of nearly a century.

Farming out the poor is another instance of handling public responsibility as a business transaction. A hundred years ago a report on the state of the poor in Massachusetts observes that where there is no almshouse the poor are "disposed of by the overseers in several ways":

1. The overseers farm them out at stipulated prices to contractors who are willing to receive and keep them on condition of getting what labor they can out of the paupers.

2. Relief is afforded to the poor at their own habitations.

3. The poor are sold at auction—the meaning of which is that he who will support them for the lowest price becomes their keeper; and it often happens of course, that the keeper is himself almost a pauper before he purchases, and adopts this mode in order not to fall a burden upon the town. Thus he and another miserable human being barely subsist upon what would hardly comfortably maintain himself alone—a species of economy much boasted of by some of the town officers and purchasers of paupers."

This report concludes:

1. That the poor when farmed out or sold were frequently treated with barbarity and neglect.

2. That the education and morals of the children of paupers—except in almshouses—were almost wholly neglected. They grew up in filth, idleness, ignorance and disease, and many became early candidates for the prison or the grave.

Until half a century ago commissions in the British army were private property. The officer bought his commission and when he was done with it he sold it for the highest price he could obtain. The capable, experienced officer could be jumped over in promotion by a mere youth. The high cost of a commission excluded members of the lower and middle classes from desirable places in the army and made the command of her Majesty's troops a prerogative of the aristocracy. This class privilege was

extinguished by paying the owners of commissions \$35,000,-000 in compensation.

The aggressions of the profits motive today are, then, but an eddy in a great current which has borne us farther and farther from the practice of purchase. That in modern society love, salvation, clerical ministrations, protection, justice, education, access to the professions, access to the public service, promotion, and recognition, are generally to be had on a basis of need or desert, instead of price, is owing to numerous triumphs over commercialism by the spirit of good will, justice and democracy.

EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN.